

OUR SHORT STORY PAGE

Come Round and Take That Elephant Away

BY BARTON CURRIE

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SANDSTORM SMITH was full entitled to the elephant brand of dream stuff—said Jonesy of the Dizzy Ghost—and we passed him a pure bill of rights to wade in and designate the herd in the simple colors of his innocent delusions, not barring wings or roller skates. So, when he narrows himself down to one single, unduplicated elephant, the which beast to the customary shade of smoked oyster and portions according to nature, some in the party sits up and gives him the "Huh! Huh!"

"Own up like a man, Sandy," said Red McKenna, "that you couldn't count 'em all; that they were little pink chaps that come through the transom, down a staple ladder, across the room single file, each one gripping the tail of the one ahead with his trunk; that, one by one, they hopped up on the bed, made a little spring on your chest and somersaulted out the window. Confess, lad; for no man of your disposition and custom of lubricating the intellect sees only one elephant at a time and him not done in high colors and frisky."

The large perpetual smile which made Sandstorm Smith beloved of man, woman, and dog went out like a snuffed light. You could see as his eye narrowed that something was firm and fixed in his mind that he liked, and to disturb which put the blower on his dander. He shut his lips hard and said:

"Aloysius Xavier McKenna, if it weren't that it would be a superfluity of speech and a statement of open, clear-as-day, over-apparent fact I'd call you a liar. I remark there's only one packer-derm in that dream of mine. Furthermore, that packer-derm was a her not a him. She was a sober, orderly, mild lady elephant such as which don't occur in the dreams of an acid-absorbing strawberry blonde that parts his name in the middle with an X; and, moreover, she was no gymnast."

"I leave it to the Widow Buckley here if I did not partake of three satisfying, wholesome meals yesterday, winding up with two orders of buckwheats and maple drip for supper. If you feel so moved, proclaim to the Widow Buckley that a man that dines with my consistency and appetite at the Home Grub should be subject to visions of rainbow elephants that dance the brangle on a dyspeptic chest."

McKenna twitched his shoulders and smiled light.

"Patter ahead Sandstorm," said the Widow Buckley, helping him to a portion of rice pudding that rose like a little mountain in the dish.

"Yes, do tell us all about that dream," cried Betty Buckley, "for it seems ages since I've seen an elephant. And goodness knows when there'll ever be a circus in Goldfield."

Sandstorm looked up and down the table suspiciously and said:

"Subsequent to that tasteless little supper I mentioned I decided to bunk. I drops right off to sleep, and the first thing I knows there's a thundering knock on the door. I unhook my gun from the bedside and gets up. The door's bolted fast and I

goes to the window, sticks out my gun first and then my head. It's moonlight—so clear I can read the sign on the Daisy stamp mill half a mile off. But what clamps my vision is the hind legs of an elephant occupying considerable space beyond the corner of the shack. Its tail was moving patient and gentle back and forth. Still I was some stunned, not having met any packer-derms round camp recent or beforehand. But as you never can know what to expect in this big boom diggings, the notion rises that I investigate that elephant."

"I opens the door just a little, whereat the trunk attached to the forward overhang of said elephant reaches in and waves itself nervous and timid, like a woman fluttering her hand. I opens the door wide and she gives a pleasant nod of her head and begins swaying. One look in her eye convinces me she's my friend, and when she turns her head away with a bashful jerk I know she's a lady elephant and not used to glimpsing bachelors in their py-jamas. The minute I climbs in to my overalls and boots her attitude changes and she takes me up on her back as easy as a sissie crane lifting a can of corn."

"As soon as I'm seated comfortably, off she starts up the Little Belladonna trail. Straight up the trail she hoots it swinging her trunk from side to side and now and then giving a contented little snort. When she's abreast the shaft ferricks she picks me off her back and sets me down, then grips a sledgehammer in her trunk and swings it over her head, bringing it down with a bursting smash on the edge of the shaft. A cloud of rock and dust flies up, whereat she drops on her knees and reaches down into the shaft. She's on her knees about thirty winks before she slowly drops back on her haunches, throwing up her trunk in which she's got curled a chunk of pure gold the size of a nail keg."

"My eyes just about stand out on my cheeks at sight of that bullion gleaming dark in the moon-shine, and as she waves it before me that elephant's face takes on a big, generous smile—yes," and Sandstorm shot a fierce look around the table, "she laughs and passes me the nugget. Like a chump, not considering the left of it, I takes hold of that slab of ore and she lets go. So do I and it lands on my feet—"

Sandstorm became suddenly absorbed in negotiat-

done up in a bale of cotton and labelled "The Belladonna Nugget."

In Little Sammy Harbin, however, Sandstorm found some genuine sympathy. Sammy considered that he really owed the Big Joshua claim to Smith, though that camp cut-up didn't deserve a shadow of gratitude.

"It stands to reason," argued Sammy, "that if he hadn't put up that joke on me I'd never have wandered into the desert and located that Joshua tree."

"See here," Sammy suddenly enthused, swinging on Sandstorm who was trying to hide his sheep's smile, "didn't you dream about that Joshua tree?"

Sandstorm gave a guilty start. Then he said, developing a sudden cough:

"Not about that particular one I described to you, but off and on there's been a forest of Joshua trees walking through my dreams."

"That's proven," cried Sammy. "There was a real one—that's proven. Now, why couldn't there be a real elephant?"

"Of course," ran on our little bonanza king, whose Massachusetts learning had become shot with some of the hunch fancies that eventually grip the minds of all gold hunters, "there are probably not any pachyderms browsing round in the sage brush, but suppose you brought one down. It might bring you the luck you dreamed of."

"If you'll dream about a parcel of snakes," spoke up Rawhide Pete, "I know where there's a nest of side-winders' back of the Yellow Horse mine."

"An' I know where there's a coffin maker that's got your size in stock," retorted Sandstorm, taking Little Sammy's arm and stamping out of the zone of Josh that develops in the Glad Hand."

Yes, it was due to Samuel Harbin, Esquire, late of Boston, Mass., that Goldfield was later afflicted with a one-animal zoo. He not only worked up the idea, until it had rooted itself deeper in the base grips of a gun tree in Sandstorm Smith's mind, but he furnished the funds that enabled that feather-headed giant to establish his hunch as a two-ton fact."

In a Reno paper one day was a cut showing a procession of elephants, each one liberally tattooed with a pill legend that was exciting the desperate population of the Washoe slope at that time. The cut showed the populace of Reno thronging the main street, feasting their eyes on the novelty and purchasing pills in gross lots.

But it wasn't the pills that agitated the breast of Sandstorm Smith when that Reno paper fell into his hands. He was stricken with an idea bigger'n the biggest pill ever rolled, and forthwith jumped his motor-cycle, steamed over the hills to Little Sammy's mine, negotiated a considerable loan and burned up the Tonopah trail to catch the first and only daily train out of the desert.

No particular notice was taken of his fitting so sudden and eager, but his return was an event that called for calamity type in the camp daily.

A lone prospector on the Tonopah trail sighted the classic shape of Sandstorm Smith making pace through the chimerical for one standard size elephant, and being public-spirited said lone prospector brings his plump into camp under spur and passes the good word. In consequence a cavalcade, including a three-horn band, promoted and led by Red McKenna, finds Sandstorm and that elephant three miles above the boundaries of our fair village, but the Smith procession had stopped, the four-legged, end of it holding an argument in short, sharp snatches.

Sandstorm was wearing a look of pained weariness under the alkali smudge, so Red asked:

"Is your friend tired, Sandy?"

"Tired nothing," shot back Smith. "Don't you know a packer-derm can outwalk anything on hoof. What she wants is hay. If you fellows will run back and get a bale you can go on with your blankety blank frivolity. I been afoot since the train makes the Tonopah yards at midnight, and while the hay's being brought I sleeps under the openwork shade of yonder Joshua tree."

What's more he gets an hour's siesta spite of the worst that three-horn band can do, and while he's so engaged Goldfield arrives by foot, stage, pony, and motor-cycle and makes the acquaintance of that elephant.

She was a young elephant, not over six feet tall and about the same in beam, whereas from appendage to appendage she measured twelve. But aside from the fact of her being an elephant her most striking feature is the lettering on her flanks. Pills is spelt out bold on both sides, and just before the Pills was a blur showing where the major portion of her original decorative literature had been rubbed off.

"I worked a whole day on that pill layout," Sandstorm sighed, when the band finally blighted his cozy trance, "and I guess toward the last I scraped her, for she reached round, picked me up and slammed me down mighty rude."

"Did you ride her down from Tonopah?" asked Beans, the livery man.

After Miss Pills had consumed about fourteen dollars' worth of Goldfield's best imported hay Red McKenna led off with his hand and she swung along peacefully and smiling, keeping step with the rusty harmony of the horns.

When Red halted the procession in front of the Glad Hand he made a neat address, applauding Sandstorm as an unprecedented philanthropist in that he'd furnished the camp with a considerable if one-piece hippodrome. Smith's blushes outblazed Red's hair, for that strange young person considered that he'd done a big thing, and nothing fantastic, in providing Goldfield with a personally conducted zoo, and when the cheering died down and Miss Pills had had a forty-gallon drink he marched her up the Little Belladonna trail.

When Little Sammy came into the Home Grub that night there was an uncertain smile worrying his thin lips and a twisted crowsfoot crinkled deep between his eyes.

"Sandy's having a hell of a time," he said low and solemn to me so Red McKenna across the aisle couldn't catch it. "He can't leave that elephant out in the night air and there's no shelter available. They won't take her at Beans' stable and the doorway of his shack's too narrow and the roof too low. Then there isn't a foot of lumber in this dip of the desert to build anything with and by the time we get down some Miss Pills may have developed pneumonia or grip. Sandy says she's fearful delicate. He's got the camp tailor up there now figuring on making her a suit of fore and aft pants for night wear, but they can't promise to weave four legs into a neat fit before tomorrow night. It'll be too infernal bad," concludes Little Sammy, "if she gets a stroke of that high altitude pneumonia after what it's cost us to get her down here."

"But if she continues to exist," I said, "it's going to cost a whaling sight more to feed her with hay selling by Troy weight."

"But if she dies," groaned Little Sammy, "we'll have to buy a mine to bury her in, as I guess every inch of ground 'tween here and Hawthorne's staked out in claims."

The little owner of the Big Joshua was doing some nervous figuring in his notebook when the door of the Home Grub opened and Sandstorm burst in, rubbing his hands and smiling.

"Judging from your looks," Red McKenna greeted him, "I guess Miss Pills's sold at a profit."

"You're as humorous as usual, Red," laughed Sandstorm, "and as wrong as per scheduled. I haven't sold the lady, only got her housed snug and cozy for the night."

"Suppose you tucked her away in your palatial chateau," chuckled Red.

Sandstorm shook his head and stirred his coffee with a slow and fastidious twist of the spoon.

"No, Red," he said. "My chateau wouldn't fit." McKenna dropped his fork into his plate and the milk fount out of his eyes. Sandstorm was drinking in unmanly gulps and Little Sammy looking from one to the other in nervous puzzlement. McKenna broke the pause in a slow hard voice.

"Mister Sandstorm Smith," he said, "if you put that animated, double-ended moving van in my bungalow—well—his throat closed and he turned sallow red.

"You wouldn't refuse an innocent, homeless, female packer-derm shelter, Red, would you?" said Sandstorm.

McKenna exploded. He'd get that beast out of his bungalow if he had to take it out in sections no bigger'n dice.

"I'll begin by shooting her full of ventilating ads," he fumed, "and then I'll hire some carpenters to saw her up in one-pound lots. I'll fill the Widow Buckley had to thump his back to save him from strangling."

"That would be awful foolish, Red," said Sandstorm, concealing his joy in his coffee cup. "You did so much for the lady this afternoon, providing a band and a gorgeous greeting, that I don't think you'd mind doing more and save her delicate chest from this night air. Honest, I didn't think you'd object to taking her in for the night, though I won't ask you to sing her to sleep or fan her. Why you can bunk in with me, Red, and it'll be like old times."

"And," he went on, low and purry, "I wouldn't be for disturbing her now. It was a pretty neat fit, but as your bungalow's one of those portable hutchies I managed to unscrew the back wall and slip her in without any considerable ruin. I tied your bathrobe around her neck to protect her throat and left her happy and contented as a chuckawallah in a cloudburst."

McKenna was past speech, and after watching the patrons of the Home Grub slip under the tables one by one and thrust among the chairs he got up with a growl and shuffled out. But he and Sandstorm made it up in the course of the evening and next day got Miss Pills out of his portable bungalow without any attending disaster.

However, from day to day Sandstorm's two-ton pet continued to furnish diversion and keep Smith's hair flying up in perpendicular until it became permanent pompadour.

She followed him everywhere, nothing he could tie her to being of permanent enough character to reside long on its base or grip well in the loose stony soil. She moved his shack round so often that he was in a perpetual state of trespass.

Before a week was out he began writing and wiring all over the country, offering Miss Pills for sale cheap, then proposing to give her away to whoever'll pay the freight out of Goldfield. Little Sammy balked on that, and as the rest of the boys were getting a heap of fun out of it they were for Miss Pills as a permanent institution.

Sandstorm Smith sure did have an elephant on his hands. His hay bills scattered snow in his tawny locks and he had to quit smoking and drinking so as to keep her trough filled with spring water from Bishop.

But as some philosopher has observed, the darkest cloud, properly rent, will reveal a silver lining.

"Was along past siesta of a Saturday afternoon, when the heat gauges on Main Street had stopped bubbling above the century register and the sun was taking on a purple circumference that the eye could stand. The advance puffs of the cool evening breeze were beginning to bring folks out on the sidewalks in idle gossip. The day's fever in stock jockeying had passed and there was a little knot of young brokers, of recent import from 'Frisco, crowded in front of the new Goldfield Exchange to discuss the

latest quotations in Easy Marks, common and Come ons, preferred.

I had stepped out in front of the Glad Hand to chat with Bob Robley and Rawhide Pete and the name of Sandstorm Smith was just rising to my tongue when Pete, who was looking up toward the head of the street, burst out:

"Here comes Sandy on his motorcycle, riding under a full head of acid. Must be Miss Pills's got a colic and he's blazing the assail to Doc Regan's office."

Just one flash of a glance up the trail told me that crushing smother of dust wasn't concerned in such small matters as elephant colic and doctors, and a second look revealed that Miss Pills was in no way physically indisposed. With the grace of a grand piano she was wallowing down the trail warm in her owner's wake.

Sandstorm shut off the power as he drew into the business center of the camp, shouting to left and right as he rolled by:

"She's got a basket of dynamite and detonating caps, and wherever she drops it there's going to be—"

We lost the finish of it, but not the significance. The heavy tread of Miss Pills was waking the echoes and she wasn't more'n three hundred yards away. If you've got tucked away in your cranium the fallacy that an elephant can't move faster'n an oyster bantish the conclusion. When an eyes told us that there was a basket swinging in her trunk we could see her coming like the Over land Limited down the West coast of the Sierra.

Rawhide Pete, Bob Robley, and your humble servant joined the merry villagers Sandstorm Smith was pacing, and the big hands on Goldfield clocks didn't slip many spaces before there was a safe majority of the community moving south, east and west, but none north. If it was destined for that lady elephant to drop a basket of detonating caps and big powder the popular notion was to allow her to hog the consequences.

By the time Miss Pills began to slow down in the middle section of Main Street, Goldfield had taken on the aspect of a deserted diggers. There was only one man left behind—Tobias Perkins, the rank and file of the local G. A. R.—and his failure to join the departure was due to the fact that he broke his wooden leg and crutch in negotiating the swiftest pace he'd made since the battle of Bull Run. But crippled as he was in his timber prop he managed to mount to the roof of the Glad Hand and gaze down on Miss Pills with upstanding hair.

He told us later that she stopped plumb in front of the Glad Hand and looked up at him with malice in her eye, swinging her trunk to and fro with an angry motion that threatened to toss that basket of annihilation through the doorway under him. But she didn't. She had a double loop on the handle of that basket that failed to relax.

You see Sandstorm had been teaching her to carry and fetch shoring timber and odds and ends up at the mine, and she had picked up that basket in the magazine of the Star of Hope mine adjoining the Little Belladonna, and trotted over to him with it, thinking in her playful, girlish way that he might like it. The Star of Hope people had warned him in time to get his motorcycle under spark.

As I said before, she was a small, two-ton elephant and gentle tempered when fed sug; and she'd been petted and coddled by man, woman and child. Therefore I guess it made her feel mean and peevish to be shunned with such overwhelming unanimity; for as she looked up at Tobias Perkins on the roof she began to roar. Tobias said he heard only one roar, and that when he came to he looked round to see if he'd made heaven.

Meantime Miss Pills, who she found that roaring didn't bring her any company, and being socially inclined, swung away from the Glad Hand and started back the trail she came. From outlying hills we watched her pound up through the sage to the Little Belladonna. She took it slow and easy, swaying her trunk like a pendulum, the basket of murder and sudden death rising and falling with the rhythmical motion.

I never knew the sun to take so long setting in these altitudes as on that day. Customarily it'll swell to the size of a barrel-head, darkening to a glowing ruby shot with flashes of amethyst, hang for a few seconds in a blanket of purple mist, and then take a head down the other side of Funeral Range. But on that evening the driver of that sky chariot must have dropped his whip, for she stuck fast, directing her flaming shafts of light on that easy-going elephant.

And there was color for oils in the dark figure of Miss Pills moving toward that soft sunset glow, until finally she rounded the corner of Sandstorm's shack and moved over toward the derricks where the abandoned shaft. We had just lost sight of her in the dimming light when the earth trembled and there was a sharp luminous glare that lighted up the vicinity of the Little Belladonna; then silence and the quick-curtain shadows of a Nevada night. A sigh of relief passed round the foothills.

Sandstorm Smith, who had joined Bob Robley, Rawhide Pete, and me on the mol for Tomahawk Hill, got some of his color and nerve back and said:

"Poor girl. She sure was an elephant on my hands, but I was beginning to get mighty attached to her." Then he rode off on his motorcycle and the population of Goldfield returned to their affairs.

An hour or so later we were discussing the probability of locating any of Miss Pills in Samerale County when we heard the racket of Sandstorm Smith's motorcycle at the door.

His face was stone sober and graven solemn as he walked into the Glad Hand, but there was a peculiar nervous twitch about his eyes and mouth. No one spoke while he fortified himself with two successive fortifications, but when he ordered a third Rawhide Pete couldn't stand the suspense.

"Djerindanyother?" he asked.

"Any of her?" said Sandstorm, wheeling round from the bar and raising his eyebrows.

"Any of her?" he drawled, tilting his glass with maddening deliberation. "Why, she wasn't scratched. She dropped the basket down the old shaft and the shot opened up that big-pay ledge I'd given up hope of. I left a slab in the essay office that'll run forty thousand to the ton—so blooming rich I saw the streak in it with a lantern."

"But," he concluded, wiping away an imaginary tear, "Miss Pills has got a bad attack of nerves, so I guess I'll ship her over to 'Frisco, where I'll see that she gets the costliest berth there is in Golden Gate Park. Where's that McKenna person who says there's nothing in dreams?"

